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# The Mosque Committee Conflict: An Ethnographic Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study examines the factors causing conflict within a religious institution, in this case, a mosque, and the reconciliation process.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The ethnographic approach was employed as a qualitative research method due to the protracted and intricate nature of the conflict phase at Nasrullah Mosque in Bengkulu City, Indonesia. The data collection process was initiated in 2022, with the intensive phase of interviews taking place from June to December 2024.

**Findings** – Poor financial transparency was identified as the underlying cause of the problems that arose at Nasrullah Mosque. The failure of mosque administrators to furnish financial reports resulted in the manipulation of the mechanism for replacing mosque leaders. Ethnic issues and differences in religious practices were used to remove several leaders who were critical of the accountability of mosque funds.

**Research implications** – The findings of this study are of particular utility to practitioners and mosque administrators, as they underscore the necessity for enhanced transparency, accountability, and effective communication in the resolution of conflicts.

**Originality/value** – Disputes over mosque management rights are seldom documented in an ethnographic context. A substantial body of research has previously focused on conflicts between mosques and their surrounding communities.

**Keywords** Mosque conflict, Religious institutions, Mosque committee, Ethnography.

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Religious institutions have exerted a profound influence on the development and preservation of human civilization. Mosques, as religious spaces for Muslims, serve a variety of functions that are widely regarded as having brought numerous benefits to the surrounding community, particularly Muslims. In addition to serving as sites of religious worship, mosques function as educational spaces (Rahmawati et al., 2018; Sözeri et al., 2022). During times of crisis, such as disasters, mosques have been known to operate as emergency shelters (Cahyadi et al., 2021; Cheema, 2012; Cheema et al., 2014; Utaberta & Asif, 2017). As indicated in the works of Utaberta & Asif (2017) and As-Salafiyah et al. (2020) community economic empowerment activities have been identified as a significant factor in the study. Similarly, the contributions of tourism, as explored by Baiquni & Heriani (2021), Kessler & Raj (2017), and Kessler (2015), have highlighted its role in economic development. Additionally, the research on women's empowerment, as demonstrated by Prickett (2015), and Rao (2021), underscores the importance of gender equality in economic growth. The increasing prevalence of multifunctionality in mosques has led to the emergence of organizational structures that demand clear management. The dearth of administrators within mosques can result in a multitude of issues, including irregular activities, substandard maintenance, and an inability to adequately address the needs of the congregation. The involvement of mosque administrators is crucial for the continuity and prosperity of these institutions.



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In Indonesia, the management structure of mosques is determined by a deliberative process in which the Muslim community residing in proximity to the mosque engages in collective decision-making. The appointed managers generally perform their duties without receiving a salary, instead relying on the promise of divine recompense. Conversely, the role of mosque administrator is held in high esteem within the community. According to Rahmat and Tedy (2018), the efficacy with which a mosque leader administers its resources is demonstrably associated with the community's well-being. The significance of the leader's role renders this position a highly contested one. It is not uncommon for communities to form alliances with the objective of either winning or overthrowing an individual within the mosque. Interests become part of the conflict within religious institutions.

A notable instance of conflict transpired within a mosque in Bungamas Village, Bengkulu. Initially, the mosque was utilized by the residents of Bungamas as a place of worship and as a center for religious activities, as is customary, and played an important role in preserving religious traditions and cultural values in the community. However, as time passed, conflicts emerged among the mosque's administrative body. This finding suggests that the country continues to grapple with a pervasive presence of conflicts and disputes, encompassing various forms such as political, economic, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Religious conflicts manifest not only between different religions or what is known as inter-religious conflicts, but also frequently occur between followers of the same religion or intra-religious conflicts (Al-Krenawi, 2016; Rahmat et al., 2025).

During the preliminary observation period, it was noted that the conflict at Nashrullah Mosque commenced when the former imam raised questions concerning the accountability reports for the production of hijabs or prayer partitions between men and women, as well as the accountability report for the purchase of carpet cleaners. This decision stemmed from the emergence of inquiries from numerous congregants regarding the credibility of these reports. The former administration of the mosque was dissolved, and no financial records were ever disclosed to the mosque congregation. This led to speculation regarding the mosque's financial management and the necessity for a change in administration. The provision of transparent and honest financial information to the public is predicated on the assumption that the public has an inherent right to comprehensively understand the government's accountability in the management of entrusted resources and its compliance with established regulations. This provoked a strong reaction from the affected parties, leading to their credibility being called into question. This dynamic, in turn, led to a diminution in communication among mosque administrators, thereby giving rise to inter-group division.

The researcher's examination of extant literature revealed the existence of prior studies on the subject. However, it should be noted that this particular aspect was not thoroughly delineated. The replacement of mosque administrators in a region has not been accompanied by any indication of conflict. In light of the aforementioned rationale, the researcher's interest lies in investigating the conflict surrounding the replacement of mosque administrators. The present study employs ethnographic research to obtain its data sources, a methodological approach that confers upon it distinctive characteristics. The ethnographic approach is employed to facilitate a more profound comprehension of the conflicts that emerge within the context of mosque management. Ethnography enables researchers to immerse themselves in the daily lives of the community, observe their interactions, and comprehend the values, beliefs, and norms that influence their behavior and conflicts. Employing an ethnographic approach in this context promises to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of these conflicts and to identify solutions that are in alignment with local cultural values and norms. The objective is to resolve these conflicts in a manner that is both sustainable and harmonious. The objective of this study is to address the limitations of prior research in this area.

## 2. Method

Throughout the research, we followed an ethnographic workflow. We chose this approach because it addresses social, cultural, and moral aspects of society, and because the timeframe for the occurrence of conflicts is sufficiently long (2022–2023). Ethnography is a process that involves prolonged observation of a group. During this time, the researcher becomes immersed in the daily lives of the participants or conducts individual interviews with group members (Geertz, 1982; Spradley, 2016). The researcher studies the meaning or significance of every behavior, language, and interaction within the group because ethnography is essentially the researcher's attempt to understand how people interact and cooperate through observable phenomena in everyday life. The conflict over replacing mosque administrators at the Nashrullah Mosque is considered unique and rare because it involves power in a social context. According to Denzin (2001) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), situations and events can be understood when researchers grasp the social and historical context of the phenomena being studied. The Nashrullah Mosque, located at Jalan Raya Bengkulu-Manna Km 60 in Bungamas Village, Seluma District, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia, was selected as the study location.

We used participatory observation to record and analyze social interactions and dynamics within the community related to the conflict over replacing mosque administrators. Throughout the process, we conducted in-depth interviews and documentation concurrently. It took one year and six months, from January 2023 to June 2024, to collect all the data. Our informants included nine individuals, such as village officials, mosque committee members, an imam, and mosque attendees. All informants agreed to provide accurate and truthful information. However, there was an initial agreement that informants would not be permitted to use their real names.

We analyzed all field data derived from interviews, participatory observation, and documentation following the standards of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2018). We repeatedly read the interview transcripts to identify keywords, categorize the data, and determine themes. Key findings, particularly the sequence of conflict events, were confirmed through data validity checks, including technical, source, and researcher triangulation. This systematic approach provided answers to the main research questions.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The Dynamics of Conflict in the Replacement of Mosque Administrators

Conflict is an inherent aspect of human existence, manifesting in all temporal and spatial realms. The advent of conflict can occasion losses in various domains, including communication, interpersonal relationships, and the collective objectives that are to be accomplished in concert. Dahrendorf (1958) conceptualizes conflict theory as the consequence of societal discord, exemplified by the contention surrounding the replacement of the Nashrullah Mosque administrators, a matter that engaged the community. The present study found that the conflict over the replacement of the mosque committee at the Nashrullah Mosque in Bungamas Village began with feelings of social jealousy, followed by a lack of transparency in reporting the mosque's cash budget, the system of selecting committee members, and differing cultural norms.

Initially, the phenomenon of social jealousy must be acknowledged. Duffy et al. (2012) posit that interpersonal conflicts frequently emerge as a consequence of social envy driven by economic disparities within a given society. Social jealousy is defined as the inability to understand or accept social conditions within a community. Social jealousy is analogous to conflict, which is an inherent element of social interaction. The social jealousy observed at Nashrullah Mosque in Bungamas Village is a case of jealousy among mosque administrators. This state of affairs emerged due to the selection of an imam by the community, who has

approach been entrusted with the role of mosque administrator for approximately 26 years. In some cases, other mosque administrators aspire to become imams, yet the community's selection of an imam remains consistent, thereby evoking feelings of envy among the competing administrators. The congregation's annual selection of the same imam is indicative of their continued satisfaction with his teachings.

The social relations among the Serawai tribe are characterized by amiability, and they adhere to the tradition of kinship. The Serawai tribe does not engage in discrimination; even newcomers who come to the Serawai area are considered part of the Serawai tribe after six months of residence. However, this is not the case in reality. During the transition in mosque administration, one of the administrators delivered a discourse to the community, as a native of Bungamas Village, regarding the former imam who hailed from Java and subsequently assumed the role of imam at the mosque in Bungamas Village. As previously articulated, any individual who has resided in Bungamas Village or is affiliated with the Serawai tribe for six months is designated as a native resident. However, the former imam has resided in Bungamas Village for over 26 years, indicating that he should be considered a native resident of the village or a member of the Serawai tribe.

The customs and traditions in Bungamas Village are characterized by the adherence of its inhabitants, who are members of the Serawai tribe, to a set of principles that govern their daily conduct. These principles emphasize the importance of politeness, ethical behavior, and adherence to established manners. This is due to an understanding that by exhibiting respect and courtesy, they can contribute to the cultivation of harmony and unity within their community. For instance, younger individuals demonstrate respect and honor for those who are older, while older individuals exhibit benevolence and care toward younger ones. However, this is not always the case. According to the available information, the former imam was compelled to relinquish his position and was subjected to mistreatment, including being compelled to resign and then facing false accusations of using offensive language. Additionally, one of the newly appointed mosque administrators expelled the former imam from the Nashrullah Mosque. The former imam, having departed from the Nashrullah Mosque for approximately ten months, subsequently joined another mosque.

Moreover, social jealousy endures even after the transition of authority to the new mosque management. The recently appointed religious leaders reportedly engaged in acts of harassment directed towards the former imam during his prayers at an alternate mosque. One of the methods employed was to approach the management of the other mosque and refuse the former imam's prayers there. Furthermore, the recently appointed religious leaders disseminated rumors among the congregation that the former imam was seeking power or attempting to assume authority over another mosque. However, these concerns were rebuffed by other mosque administrators and some congregants. The congregation advanced the position that individuals are at liberty to engage in prayer at the mosque irrespective of their ethnic or racial background. They further articulated an openness to the former imam's continuation in leading prayers at the mosque. Upon hearing this, the administrators of the new mosque experienced mounting frustration in response to the response from the other mosque administrators.

Secondly, the absence of financial transparency within the mosque is a salient concern. A dispute regarding the financial resources allocated to the mosque emerged due to misinterpretations among the mosque's administrative personnel. The financial resources of the mosque necessitate effective management to ensure the financial operations of the mosque are conducted responsibly. The impetus for the conflict was the absence of a clearly defined accountability structure for the mosque's financial resources. At the onset, the mosque administration encountered no difficulties in terms of social relations or communication among its members.

In 2022, a collaboration between a mosque administrator and a women's group administrator resulted in the creation of prayer dividers. A proposal was meticulously prepared and subsequently submitted to the mosque imam for approval. The imam's approval was contingent upon the subsequent sourcing of the necessary funds, with the mosque's cash reserves to be utilized in the event of any shortfall. After the completion of the aforementioned items, the subjects were instructed to prepare a report on the items. After the acquisition and utilization of the items in the mosque, the mosque imam submitted a request for the accountability report. Despite repeated requests, the report was never submitted. Consequently, there is currently no accountability report for the prayer partitions. This has led to suspicion among the mosque congregation, who have a right to understand the mosque's financial accountability. The dissemination of financial reports is advantageous for the congregation, as it enables members to ascertain the provenance of funds, the amount received, the allocation of expenditures for specific purposes, and the current cash balance.

Thirdly, the selection of mosque administrators is conducted without the involvement of the community. The community plays a pivotal role in the welfare of the people, particularly in the context of mosque welfare. The role in improving the mosque's welfare is inseparable from community involvement in the formation of the mosque's management. Therefore, it can be posited that community involvement in the formation of the mosque's management has the potential to effect significant changes to the mosque's management. This is because the community is the entity that will be responsible for carrying out every religious activity at the mosque. The recently implemented mosque management selection system employs a formateur system.

The impetus for the subsequent discord within the mosque community can be traced to a series of miscommunicated messages between the mosque imam and a member of the administrative team, which culminated in a conflict that escalated in February 2023. This was evident in the absence of cordial greetings and the apparent indifference exhibited by one of the mosque administrators, which prompted another administrator to initiate an inquiry into the conduct of the mosque imam. The objective of this operation was to remove the mosque imam. One method that was employed was the creation of an anonymous letter that was purportedly authored by the mosque congregation. Concurrently, a member of the mosque committee undertook a series of visits to the residences of congregation members, extending beyond the confines of the Bungamas neighborhood, to disseminate disparaging narratives concerning the mosque imam. Consequently, the reputation of the mosque imam has been tarnished in several other neighborhoods. As time has passed, the relationship and communication between the mosque imam and one of the committee members has deteriorated to the point where the committee member refuses to communicate with the imam. As time progressed, one of the committee members approached the Local Community Development Board (CDB) to ascertain a method for removing the mosque imam and preventing his nomination for future positions.

Concurrently, the CDB approached the mosque imam intending to draft a resignation letter, as the other mosque committee members had previously tendered their resignations. However, in reality, the imam was the only individual requested to compose the resignation letter, while the other former committee members were not solicited for such a document. The mosque imam was compelled to write the resignation letter. In the wake of the resignations of the mosque committee members, a new committee was established through an electoral process. During the election period, a significant number of mosque congregants expressed discontent. Following the establishment and operation of the new management team over several months, the congregants exhibited a decline in enthusiasm for worshipping at the mosque. Consequently, a gradual shift in congregational affiliation was observed, with adherents opting to attend mosques outside their immediate vicinity.

### 3.2 Finding a Middle Ground

Conflict resolution is a process that involves the collaborative identification and resolution of problems. Conflict resolution can be defined as the process of identifying the underlying causes of conflict and subsequently establishing new, long-term relationships between the groups involved in the conflict (Bercovitch, 2019; Gopin, 2002). The parties involved in the conflict must assess and analyze the problems that have arisen so that they can be resolved together in the best possible way. Additionally, the study identified a process of conflict resolution concerning the replacement of administrators at the Nashrullah Mosque. The conflict resolution process was executed through the utilization of mediation and arbitration.

Mediation is defined as a process of resolving disputes in society that involves a third party as a neutral party, called a mediator. The mediator's role is to facilitate the establishment of a voluntary and equitable agreement among the disputing parties. In this study, the mediation process entailed the involvement of a third party, namely the village government, who functioned as the mediator in resolving the conflict. In the context of mediation, the community endeavored to articulate their concerns to the government, particularly the village administration. In response to the community's concerns, the government has adopted a positive stance, suggesting that the community exercise patience and observe the new management for one year. The result of mediation is an agreement or settlement that is not binding on the disputing parties because the mediator, as a neutral party, is not empowered to make decisions. The result of the mediation process in this study was an agreement among the parties for the community to wait for one year to observe the new administration.

Arbitration is a process of dispute resolution involving a third party as an adjudicator. The adjudicator, as a third party, is expected to maintain a neutral stance, refraining from taking sides in the dispute. The disputing parties have expressed their consent to submit the resolution of the aforementioned conflict to the arbitrator. Subsequently, the arbitrator renders a definitive and binding decision. The village government, in its capacity as the third party, has elected to administer elections for a new mosque management committee. This initiative is being carried out with the support of the BKM and CDB. The government's actions are in accordance with the regulations of the village head, which serve as guidelines for the village government in carrying out its duties.

The selection process for the mosque management committee was conducted openly at the end of December 2023 at the Nashrullah Mosque, inviting all elements of the Bungamas sub-district, including the community, community leaders, youth leaders, mosque administrators (both old and new), and the sub-district government as the responsible party and supervisor during the selection process. The election process was executed through the utilization of a designated voting system. The community was initially tasked with nominating and selecting candidates for the position of mosque committee member. The technical implementation entailed the involvement of all voters, except for the candidates themselves, particularly the imam. The imam was tasked with inscribing the names of their preferred candidates for imam or mosque committee members on a piece of paper that had been provided by the organizers. Subsequently, the documents were collected by the organizers and read aloud in front of the public. The results were subsequently disseminated to the public, and their finality and binding nature were duly established.

## 4. Conclusion

Despite its absence of monetary value, the prestige associated with mosques remains a significant social construct. The present study found that conflicts related to the replacement of mosque administrators at the Nashrullah Mosque were triggered by social jealousy among mosque administrators, a lack of transparency

in mosque financial reporting, unilateral appointment of administrators, and changes in religious activities at the mosque. A noteworthy discovery is that even within a community that rigorously upholds religious standards, racism can emerge as a source of discord, even within the confines of the "House of God." The conflict resolution strategies employed in such cases include mediation and arbitration. The present study also reveals that these conflicts have a significant impact on the mosque community, including a decline in trust and participation in mosque activities.

The findings of this study offer practitioners and mosque administrators a framework for addressing the need for enhanced transparency, accountability, and effective communication in conflict resolution. The present study posits that mosque administrators prioritize the cultivation of trust and cooperation among stakeholders, as well as the establishment of clear procedures for the resolution of conflicts. The study underscores the significance of incorporating the social and cultural milieu of the mosque community when addressing conflict. Subsequent studies should examine the influence of financial accountability and transparency in reducing potential conflicts of interest in religious institutions.

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